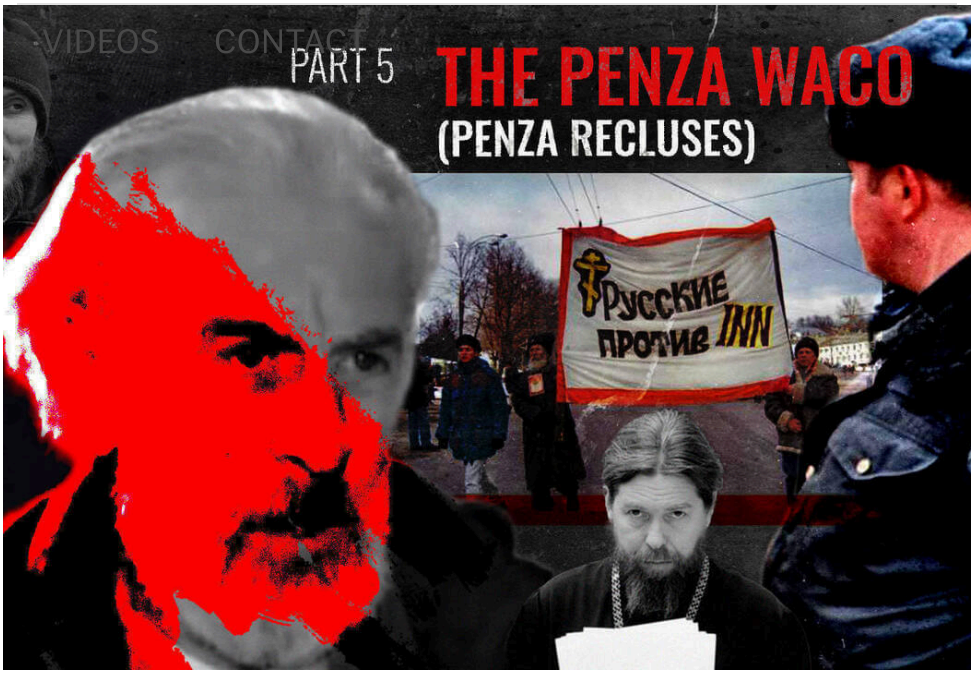


ARTICLES

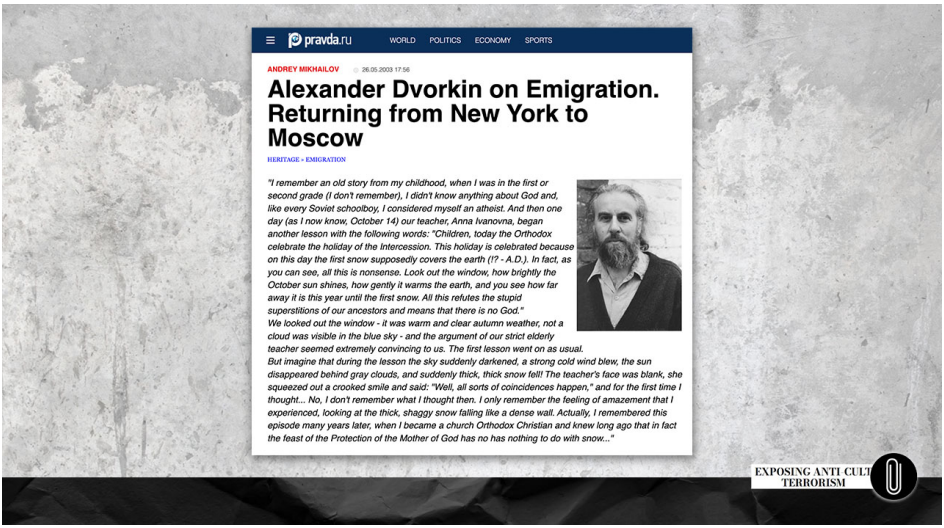
Russian Waco. How Alexander Dvorkin's Cult Tried to Recreate the Branch Davidian Tragedy in Penza

Part 5

June 2, 2025 · 32 mins read

Prologue

In 2003, Alexander Dvorkin gave an extensive interview to Pravda newspaper.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WORLD
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ANDREY MIKHAILOV
26.05.2003 17:56
Alexander Dvorkin on Emigration. Returning from New York to Moscow
HERITAGE » EMIGRATION
"I remember an old story from my childhood, when I was in the first or second grade (I don't remember), I didn't know anything about God and, like every Soviet schoolboy, I considered myself an atheist. And then one day (as I now know, October 14) our teacher, Anna Ivanovna, began another lesson with the following words: "Children, today the Orthodox celebrate the holiday of the Intercession. This holiday is celebrated because on this day the first snow supposedly covers the earth (!? - A.D.). In fact, as you can see, all this is nonsense. Look out the window, how brightly the October sun shines, how gently it warms the earth, and you see how far away it is this year until the first snow. All this refutes the stupid superstitions of our ancestors and means that there is no God."
We looked out the window - it was warm and clear autumn weather, not a cloud was visible in the blue sky - and the argument of our strict elderly teacher seemed extremely convincing to us. The first lesson went on as usual.
But imagine that during the lesson the sky suddenly darkened, a strong cold wind blew, the sun disappeared behind gray clouds, and suddenly thick, thick snow fell! The teacher's face was blank, she squeezed out a crooked smile and said: "Well, all sorts of coincidences happen," and for the first time I thought... No, I don't remember what I thought then. I only remember the feeling of amazement that I experienced, looking at the thick, shaggy snow falling like a dense wall. Actually, I remembered this episode many years later, when I became a church Orthodox Christian and knew long ago that in fact the feast of the Protection of the Mother of God has no has nothing to do with snow..."
EXPOSING ANTI CULT TERRORISM

Screenshot of the article on pravda.ru website

The article touched on why Dvorkin returned to Russia in the 1990s. Against the backdrop of his anti-American rhetoric, one particular passage caught our attention:

"Today, [America] is in many ways an entirely different country, bound in the rubber shackles of political correctness, ***a land of economic coercion and tightening global control.*** *...Yes, people rarely get thrown in jail in that society (though I could point to*

many outrageous exceptions). But there are real levers of coercion, the economic ones. If everyone lives on credit, using a plastic card, the threat of losing one's job over something politically incorrect and instantly losing everything, from one's home and car to one's health insurance, is the most terrifying thing of all. ...At this point in history, Russia is the freest country in the world because here, at least for now, we still have the ability to be ourselves, to express our opinions, to call black black and white white without being afraid for our future."[1]

What comes next will make it clear why this passage in Dvorkin's long interview stood out to us.

Whipping up hysteria

In the early 2000s, as information technology advanced and more government and public systems across Russia became computerized, a wave of protest began to ripple through Orthodox circles. The trigger was the introduction of a unified taxpayer database and the assignment of a personal number, also known as taxpayer identification number (TIN), to every citizen who paid taxes.

TIN components: (1) code of a subject (region) of the Russian Federation, (2) number of a local tax office, (3) taxpayer's unique number within the Federal Tax Service division, and (4) control digits used to verify the TIN accuracy for individual entrepreneurs. [1.2]

In this number, radical Orthodox activists saw the "mark of the beast" and a sign of the coming Antichrist.

Coming of the Antichrist. Fresco from the Orthodox Osogovo Monastery

It is worth noting that the waves of religious uproar weren't confined to Russia. Back in the mid-1990s, similar protests took place in Greece where Orthodox believers rallied against the country's accession to the European Union. One of their key grievances was the introduction of new Schengen passports equipped with magnetic strips for simplified identification. By late 1997, the same protests had reached Ukraine where Orthodox communities voiced opposition to government plans to implement EU-style identification codes for citizens.

To be fair, the first mentions of the "number of the beast" and barcodes trace back to the 1970s in the United States, when this technology first emerged.

First barcodes. Sourced from 99percentinvisible.org

In 2023, Jordan Frith, professor of communication at Clemson University in South Carolina, published a book about the history of barcodes. [2] During his research, he found a 1975 article in a publication called Gospel Call that suggested barcodes could be "the Mark of the Beast" — a reference to a biblical prophecy from the Book of Revelation about the end of the world. [3]

In Russia, the rise of Orthodox anti-globalist fervor coincided with a shift in political power — specifically, the inauguration of Vladimir Putin as Russia's new president. One of the key figures fueling the protests was archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov who had previously led a campaign against the Orthodox community of Georgy Kochetkov in the 1990s. As early as 1998, Shevkunov began speaking out against globalization across various Russian media platforms.

Here's an interesting excerpt from Alexander Verkhovsky's book "Political Orthodoxy: Russian Orthodox Nationalists and Fundamentalists 1995–2001":

"...the concept of the 'diabolical barcode' became part of the worldview of a wide circle of conservative churchgoers. Thus, hegumen (now archimandrite) Tikhon Shevkunov, abbot of the Sretensky Monastery in Moscow, appeared on Radio Radonezh

in May 1998 and, while continuing to fan the flames, claiming, for example, that the number '666' was 'essentially at the root of computer calculations', still urged listeners not to boycott food products just because they had barcodes."[3]

Let us add, that Radio Radonezh was founded by Yevgeny Nikiforov, a friend of Tikhon Shevkunov. Nikiforov is the same figure who suggested Ukrainians should be annihilated with Solntsepyoks (thermobaric weapons), as was detailed in "The IMPACT" documentary [04:00:17].

Thanks to Shevkunov's relentless promotion and media stoking, tensions within church circles kept rising. By fall 1999, a large-scale campaign was underway to resist the introduction of taxpayer identification numbers (TINs). The protest movement soon spilled beyond the niche of Moscow and St. Petersburg's Orthodox nationalists, drawing in national and patriotic activists of various stripes, along with monks and clergy.

"In 2000–2001 [2]*, as Orthodox communities went to the mat over TINs, viewing them as nothing less than the 'mark of the Antichrist,' Father Tikhon stepped in to 'deescalate' what had become a dead-end standoff. He leaned on the moral authority of archimandrite Ioann (John) Krestyankin, an elder of the Pskov-Caves Monastery whom Shevkunov had known since*

childhood. At first, Ioann, alongside a handful of other revered elders in the ROC (of whom there were only three or four in total), signaled that TINs were dangerous for the soul and must not be accepted under any circumstances. Critics claim that this declaration, which sparked a panic in the Church, was also orchestrated by Shevkunov. Later, at the height of the hysteria, Father Tikhon returned to the elder and persuaded him to make a second statement affirming the safety of TINs. That message was even recorded on videotape and widely circulated in Orthodox circles."[4]

Tikhon Shevkunov (from the left), Ioann (John) Krestyankin (in the middle) Ioann (John) Krestyankin and Tikhon Shevkunov

Tikhon Shevkunov, often referred to in the media as "Putin's spiritual advisor"[1, 5] , emerged in the late 1990s as one of the most influential figures in the ROC (MP), largely due to his

close ties with the FSB and the Kremlin. After controversially taking over the Sretensky Monastery on Lubyanka, he quickly consolidated his position. While Shevkunov himself has never commented on claims of spiritual mentorship, it is known that Putin started visiting the monastery in late 1999, and they've appeared together in public numerous times. According to Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov, Shevkunov is indeed well-acquainted with the president and "enjoys considerable popularity."

Given that the peak of the TIN hysteria overlapped with the start of Putin's presidency, it's plausible that Shevkunov leveraged the moment to boost his influence and position himself as a mediator between the church and the state, deepening his connection to the president.

"Beyond the religious debate itself, what also played a huge role was the public's view of the government that was pushing the TIN system. All of this happened about a year and a half into Vladimir Putin's presidency, and opinions about him varied significantly among commentators. Unsurprisingly, attitudes toward the Russian government as a whole were just as polarized. For nationalist critics of Putin, the rollout of TINs was just another scheme from what they regarded as an 'anti-people regime.'"[3]

In other words, the uproar over TINs was not just a religious hysteria — it became a political one. For many people, it was a convenient way to voice distrust in the new leadership.

Rally “For the right to live without TIN” in front of the State Duma building

Russians against TINs

Religious procession against the introduction of TINs. Moscow, Russia, 2000.
Source: fotostrana.ru

Some priests went so far as to deny communion to those who had accepted a TIN [3] , while others urged believers to "escape to the forests," like guerrilla fighters during World War II. Some even advocated for an overthrow of the government. Notably, quotes from Irenaeus of Lyons about the "name of the beast" and the "number of the beast" frequently appeared and continue to appear in mass media and on Orthodox websites. Here are a few short excerpts from Tikhon Shevkunov's website pravoslavie.ru:

"Saint Irenaeus offers two possible interpretations of the number 666..."

"Thus," wrote Saint Irenaeus, "the number 666 represents one 'in whom all (...) apostasy, injustice, impiety, false prophecy, and deceit are summed up, which is why a fiery flood will descend (upon the earth)'..."

"Saint Irenaeus of Lyons believed that the unknown name of the Antichrist is a safeguard against deception, since he may come under a name we do not expect..."

"Thus, Saint Irenaeus derived the names [of Antichrist]: Evanthas (ΕΥΑΝΘΑΣ)... Then also Lateinos (ΛΑΤΕΙΝΟΣ) ... Teitan too, (TEITAN) ... Saint Victorinus suggested Antemos or Diclux in Latin."[6]

In fact, there are many such lines. All this looks like a branding campaign for the Center in the name of Hieromartyr Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, that had already been operating aggressively for eight years, while the contradictory nature and mass distribution of such quotes only amplified the public hysteria.

This brings us to protodeacon Andrey Kuraev, Alexander Dvorkin's friend who also taught at Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University of Humanities (PSTGU) and, as of 2001, was actively touring the country with lectures:

"For five years now, I've been living on a schedule of weekly trips. On average, I visit fifty cities a year."[7]

Back in 1999, Kuraev published a book titled "Our Defeat: Christianity at the Edge of History," where the abbreviation TIN appears 225 times! We should say he keeps touring to this day , although now mostly in European countries.

"The real movement against TINs was surely far broader than its formal channels. Alongside low-circulation newspapers and websites, there were pamphlets, audiocassettes, and leaflets — all extremely emotional and often filled with fantastical conjectures. Those materials were distributed among parishes across many regions. Secular people might not have noticed anything, but in a great many churches, radical anti-globalist ideas became widespread common knowledge."[3]

Let's cite another crusader against "totalitarian cults," Alexander Shchipkov, a former member of the Expert Council under the Russian Ministry of Justice (2009–2015) and later secretary to Patriarch Kirill:

"Problems associated with electronic identification continue to accumulate and become more complex. Identification codes and databases are becoming integral elements of a global electronic governance system. ...Meanwhile, the laws governing cyber systems are often applied to human society, and ***the system [electronic government] itself creates a risk of total control and manipulation of individuals and society."***[8]

Yet, who in fact fears e-government and globalization? Mainly those who've always operated in the shadows — through fraud, black cash, and parallel power structures. For them, transparency and accountability are deadly like sunlight to vampires, threatening to dismantle their centuries-old schemes and lay bare their true inhumane goals.

Sergey Grigoryev, editor-in-chief of "Russkaya liniya" ("Russian Line") website, offered his own interpretation of a muddled and controversial statement by archimandrite Ioann Krestyankin, Shevkunov's spiritual mentor, regarding technological progress and TINs:

"I believe the formula voiced by archimandrite Ioann Krestyankin concerning progress and particularly TINs is sound if we want peace of conscience. What I understood him to mean was: we are not going to hasten progress ourselves; others will do it with or without us. But we won't refuse TINs either when they are assigned to us: we will remain with our state until such a time comes when the Antichrist truly arrives, and then serving the state will become equivalent to serving the Antichrist. ***Moreover, to effectively fight TINs and other steps toward globalization, we shouldn't leave government bodies, but should be strengthening our positions within them."***[9]

So it was no surprise when Gennady Bukaev, Russia's minister for taxes and levies, appeared before Patriarch Kirill on January 31, 2001 and was later interviewed by archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov. Here's a revealing quote voiced by Bukaev to Shevkunov:

Patriarch Alexy II, Gennady Bukaev, Tikhon Shevkunov

Here is a quote from Gennady Bukayev, shared in an interview with Tikhon Shevkunov:

"The Patriarch expressed concern that society and the Church are being divided over TINs. During our conversation where His Holiness communicated the views of certain parishioners and clergy, ***we concluded that some aspects warrant, let's say, government-led reform of the current TIN assignment system."***

The minister basically made it clear that nobody was going to abolish the system. However, in order to defuse public tension, he proposed "reformatting," i.e. minor cosmetic adjustments that would leave the core structure untouched, but would produce an appearance that religious concerns were being taken into account.

"Here's what I want to clarify, dear taxpayers of Russia. I want to speak directly to you. A number is not assigned to a person, which the Patriarch rightly emphasizes, but to the tax file opened in a specific person's name by the tax authorities. ***It is impossible to number a human soul or personality.*** *To maintain clear tax records and avoid confusion, primarily for people's convenience, we assign a number to the tax file, not to the individual."*[10]

In 2001, the anti-TIN movement grew even larger than the campaign of late 1999 and early 2000 and prompted the Moscow Patriarchate to convene an expanded session of the Synodal Theological Commission on February 19–20, 2001:

"The Orthodox Russian people recognize the danger of globalization, the first step of which is the assignment of identification numbers, followed by electronic documents bearing unique personal identifiers. Today, the Russian Orthodox Church must raise its voice in defense of believers. It

must urge the Russian government to abandon its globalist programs as dangerous for the country and to reject totalitarian accounting methods that infringe upon civil liberties and disturb religious sensibilities. Following the examples of Ukraine and Belarus, we call on the authorities to allow citizens to refuse personal numbers and electronic documents containing encoded personal identifiers due to religious beliefs."[3]

After this plenary session, most abbots and monastery heads, especially bishops, stopped their active public speeches on the TIN issue. Yet, for ordinary parishioners, the question of how to approach TINs and electronic records remained unsolved.

On the prominent Orthodox website "Azbuka Viery" ("ABC of Faith") — azbyka.ru, an article titled "Analysis of TIN-Related Issues" stated:

"Right now, receiving a TIN is not a sin. Could that change in the future? ...Maybe things will evolve like this: first TINs, then electronic ID cards, then implants under people's skin... and then, something even worse. But why speculate about the future? Living in the present, we must remain sober and watchful. Just because our Church leadership currently allows us to receive TINs doesn't mean we should grow complacent.

Who knows what tomorrow brings? Aren't these actually the end times, brothers and sisters?"

"Also, may no one think that the author of this work is defending TINs. Not at all. TINs are earthly stuff. If anyone can avoid receiving a TIN, let them do so. If someone is strong enough to resist the construction of a 'new world order' by proper means, may God help them."[11]

This quote summarizes the church's entire rhetorical posture — internal contradictions that leave believers confused. On the one hand, the church says receiving a TIN isn't sinful. On the other, it ramps up anxiety by hinting at spiritual dangers in engaging with secular record-keeping systems. A parishioner is left in limbo: TINs are formally permitted, but not approved. Moreover, refusing a TIN becomes a sign of heightened spiritual vigilance. This framing subtly suggests that even obedient Christians who comply with the church's official guidance may unwittingly step onto a dangerous path, which actually undermines trust in the church hierarchs.

Although the furor over TINs somewhat subsided after 2001, the church never clarified its stance. The issue continued to simmer as slow but persistent unrest, largely because the perceived threat posed by TINs was never conclusively addressed.

Penza recluses

After seven years of aggressive propaganda stirred up by Orthodox fundamentalists and anticultists from Alexander Dvorkin's sect, it's hardly surprising that deliberate zombification of the flock with apocalyptic horror stories and the panic-mongering around harmless technologies like taxpayer identification numbers eventually bore toxic fruit.

On November 12, 2007, the online newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda ran a short curious article titled "Cultists Hide Underground From the End of the World" [12].

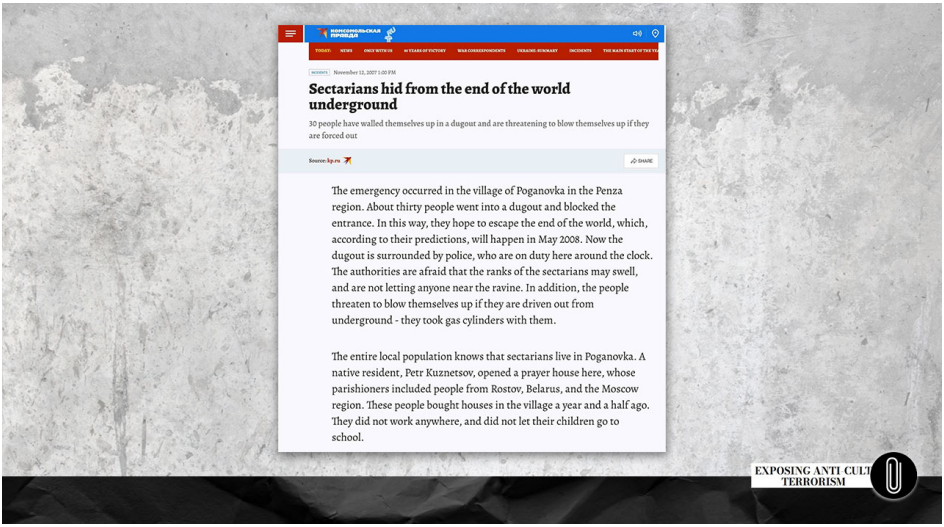
"An extraordinary event occurred in the village of Poganovka in Penza region. About 30 people went into a dugout and sealed the entrance. They hope this will save them from the end of the world, which they predict will come in May 2008. The dugout is now cordoned off by police who are on duty there around the clock. ***Authorities fear the cultists may attract new members*** *and don't let anyone approach the ravine. The group also threatened to blow themselves up if forced out — they brought gas canisters with them.*

Everyone in the area knows that cult members live in Poganovka. A local resident, Pyotr Kuznetsov, opened a prayer house there, which attracted newcomers from Rostov, Belarus,

and Moscow region. Those people bought houses in the village a year and a half ago. They didn't work and kept their children out of school.

The cult members dug a shelter in a nearby ravine, took their children (the youngest only 1.4 years old), and went into hiding.

What happened became known when ***a woman from the Moscow region couldn't reach her mother who lives in Poganovka and a***lerted the police."[12]


Sectarians hid from the end of the world underground
30 people have walled themselves up in a dugout and are threatening to blow themselves up if they are forced out
The emergency occurred in the village of Poganovka in the Penza region. About thirty people went into a dugout and blocked the entrance. In this way, they hope to escape the end of the world, which, according to their predictions, will happen in May 2008. Now the dugout is surrounded by police, who are on duty here around the clock. The authorities are afraid that the ranks of the sectarians may swell, and are not letting anyone near the ravine. In addition, the people threaten to blow themselves up if they are driven out from underground - they took gas cylinders with them.
The entire local population knows that sectarians live in Poganovka. A native resident, Petr Kuznetsov, opened a prayer house here, whose parishioners included people from Rostov, Belarus, and the Moscow region. These people bought houses in the village a year and a half ago. They did not work anywhere, and did not let their children go to school.
EXPOSING ANTI CULT TERRORISM

On the same day, this article was replicated by the Internet portal patriarchia.ru and other media outlets controlled by anticultists who instantly picked up the anticult hysteria. The text followed the classic style of anticult propaganda, relying on tried-and-true methods of demonization: panic-mongering,

crude generalizations, and artificial creation of a threat. A group of people was indiscriminately labeled as "cultists," and their actions were portrayed solely as dangerous and irrational, up to absurd accusations that they intended to blow themselves up. At the center of it all was a caricatured "dark leader" who allegedly manipulated his adherents. The situation was framed as a sinister conspiracy demanding urgent intervention.

This was only the first step in the anticultists' deliberate escalation of the situation to the level of an actual catastrophe, reminiscent of what happened in Waco, Texas, in 1993. As the story developed, more than 200 articles about the "Penza sit-in" were planted in major outlets such as RIA Novosti, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Vedomosti, Izvestia, Vesti, Kommersant, Moskovsky Komsomolets, Vesti.ru, Gazeta.ru, and others. Those pieces instantly spread across various online platforms.

It is worth highlighting what Dvorkin himself is never ashamed to openly state in his interviews. Here are his own words:

"I should say, we ***work with many federal media outlets and are well-acquainted with the journalists who specialize in topics related to cults and sects.****"*[13]

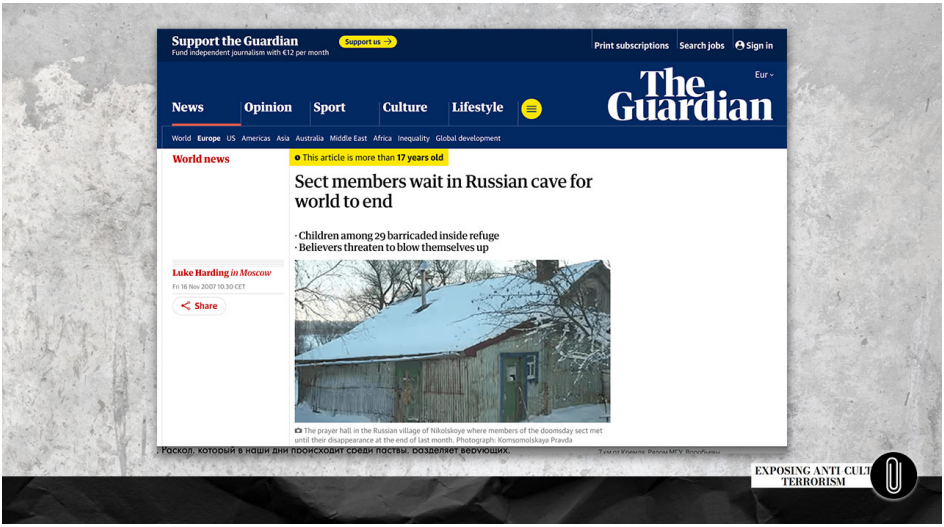
No wonder this story received such broad and emotionally charged coverage. It had all the right ingredients: “cultists,” an underground shelter, children, “the end of the world,” and, of course, the grim, almost deliberately ominous-sounding name of the village. Officially, the events unfolded in the village of Nikolskoye. However, anticultists deliberately chose to use the more resonant and sinister-sounding name Poganovka, which is translated as “Disgustville.”

According to their version, this is supposedly what local residents called the area among themselves. The choice was no accident: in modern Russian, the word “pogany” carries strong associations with something filthy, disgusting, and frightening. But in Old Church Slavonic and Church Slavonic contexts, it had a different meaning — “pagan,” that is, not belonging to the Christian world. As a result, Poganovka holds a double meaning: a vile place where pagans have gathered [1], which in the mouths of anticult-leaning journalists sounds almost like a criminal sentence. The name hits the mark: it sticks in your memory, evokes fear, and fits perfectly into the narrative of a “cult that went underground.” Just one more step in the process of demonization.

In addition, as usual, we learn about the “terrifying totalitarian sect” from relatives and parents. As Dvorkin himself put it,

"Alongside the church-appointed commissioners, there is also ***a global network of so-called 'parent initiatives'*** *and similar organizations which in the U.S. are referred to as 'anticult.'"*[14]

Therefore, the appearance of such stories in the global media space is hardly surprising.



On November 15, 2007, Gazeta.ru published an article titled "The End of the World from Poganovka" [15]. Stirring up hysteria, journalists drew a parallel between similar past events, inserting and highlighting the following section:

Mass Suicides of Cult Members

November 18, 1978. In the settlement of Jonestown (Guyana), a mass suicide of 914 members of the American religious cult People's Temple took place at the urging of their leader Jim

Jones who had been in prolonged conflict with U.S. authorities.

April 19, 1993. In Waco (Texas, USA), following a 50-day siege, about 90 members of the religious cult Branch Davidians, including 25 children, died in an act of self-immolation.

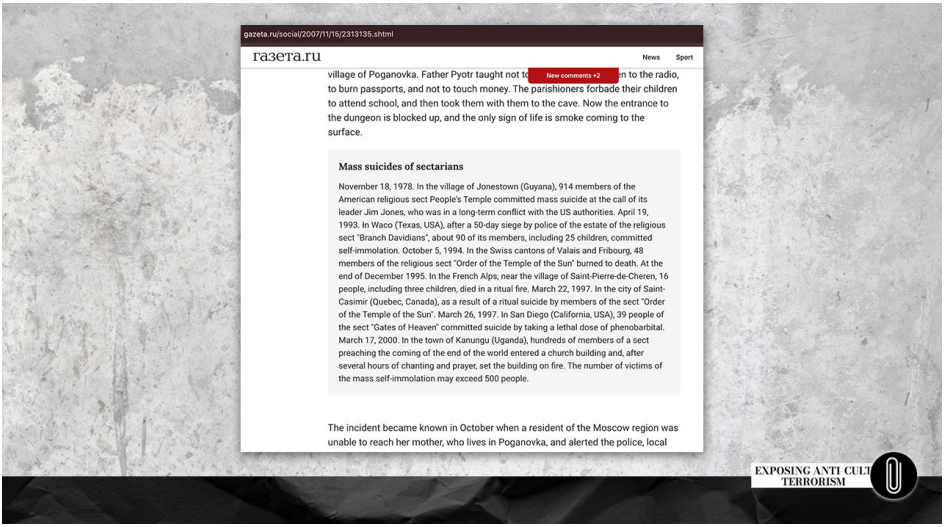
October 5, 1994. In the Swiss cantons of Valais and Fribourg, 48 members of the religious cult Order of the Solar Temple perished in fires.

Late December 1995. In the French Alps, near the village of Saint-Pierre-de-Chéren, 16 people including three children died in a ritual fire.

March 22, 1997. In the city of Saint-Casimir (Quebec, Canada), five people died in a ritual suicide carried out by members of the Order of the Solar Temple.

March 26, 1997. In San Diego (California, USA), 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult committed suicide by taking a lethal dose of phenobarbital.

March 17, 2000. In the town of Kanungu (Uganda), hundreds of members of a cult preaching the end of the world entered a church building and, after hours of chanting and prayer, set it on fire. The number of victims of this mass immolation may exceed 500. [15]


gazeta.ru/social/2007/11/15/2313135.shtml
газета.ru
News
Sport
New comments +2
village of Poganovka. Father Pyotr taught not to
n to the radio,
to burn passports, and not to touch money. The parishioners forbade their children
to attend school, and then took them with them to the cave. Now the entrance to
the dungeon is blocked up, and the only sign of life is smoke coming to the
surface.
Mass suicides of sectarians
November 18, 1978. In the village of Jonestown (Guyana), 914 members of the American religious sect People's Temple committed mass suicide at the call of its leader Jim Jones, who was in a long-term conflict with the US authorities. April 19, 1993. In Waco (Texas, USA), after a 50-day siege by police of the estate of the religious sect "Branch Davidians", about 90 of its members, including 25 children, committed self-immolation. October 5, 1994. In the Swiss cantons of Valais and Fribourg, 48 members of the religious sect "Order of the Temple of the Sun" burned to death. At the end of December 1995. In the French Alps, near the village of Saint-Pierre-de-Cheren, 16 people, including three children, died in a ritual fire. March 22, 1997. In the city of Saint-Casimir (Quebec, Canada), as a result of a ritual suicide by members of the sect "Order of the Temple of the Sun". March 26, 1997. In San Diego (California, USA), 39 people of the sect "Gates of Heaven" committed suicide by taking a lethal dose of phenobarbital. March 17, 2000. In the town of Kanungu (Uganda), hundreds of members of a sect preaching the coming of the end of the world entered a church building and, after several hours of chanting and prayer, set the building on fire. The number of victims of the mass self-immolation may exceed 500 people.
The incident became known in October when a resident of the Moscow region was unable to reach her mother, who lives in Poganovka, and alerted the police, local
EXPOSING ANTI CULT
TERRORISM

That's exactly the note published on the "Russian Line" website back in 2000, which the media picked up and massively circulated in 2007.

ruskline.ru/news_rl/2000/03/25/hronologiya_massovyh_samoubijstv
Russian People's Line
Orthodoxy. Autocracy. Nationality.
Information and analytical service
Home
Authors
RNL TV
Current topics
Union of Writers of Russia
Readers' Choice
Home > Main > CHRONOLOGY OF MASS SUICIDES
CHRONOLOGY OF MASS SUICIDES
Society
0
02:00 25.03.2000
127
November 18, 1978 - in the village of Jonestown (Guyana) 914 members of the American religious sect "People's Temple" committed mass suicide at the call of its leader Jim Jones, who was in a long-term conflict with the US authorities.
April 19, 1993 - in Waco (Texas, USA), after a 50-day siege by police of the estate of the religious sect "Branch Davidov", about 90 of its members, including 25 children, committed self-immolation.
October 5, 1994 - in the Swiss cantons of Valais and Fribourg, 48 members of the religious sect "Order of the Temple of the Sun" burned to death.
In late December 1995 - in the French Alps near the village of Saint-Pierre-de-Cheren, 16 people, including three children, died in a ritual fire.
March 22, 1997 - in the city of Saint-Casimir (Quebec Province, Canada) as a result of the ritual suicide by members of the sect "Order of the Temple of the Sun".
March 26, 1997 - in the city of San Diego (California, USA) 39 people of the sect "Gates of Heaven" committed suicide by taking a lethal dose of phenobarbital.
March 17, 2000 - in the town of Kanungu (Uganda) hundreds of members of the sect preaching the coming of the end of the world entered the building of a church and after several hours of chanting and prayers set the building on fire. The number of victims of the mass self-immolation may exceed 500 people.
ITAR-TASS
EXPOSING ANTI CULT
TERRORISM

On November 19, 2007 , Gazeta.ru ran a story titled "TIN Echoes in Penza" [16] where the sister of one of the participants in the "sit-in" explained her sister's behavior:

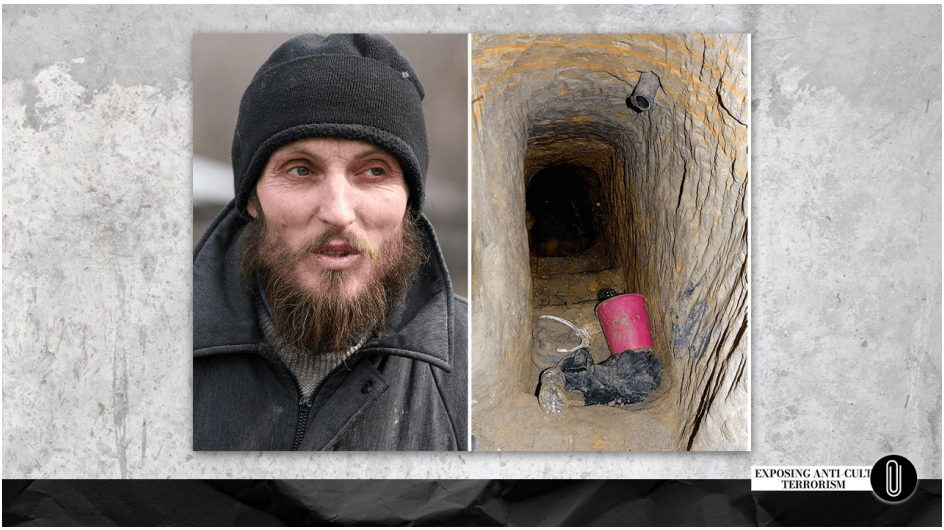
"She was very distressed about it and repeatedly said that the new priests who had accepted TINs departed from Orthodoxy and were living in sin," the hermit's sister, Lyubov, told Gazeta.ru. "Tanya said she would never set foot in church again, and that only the old church books could be trusted."[16]

According to Anatoly Pchelintsev, expert on the protection of believers' rights and religious organizations in Russia, this was predictable:

"The incident with Penza 'sectarians' was entirely foreseeable, considering the hysteria that had erupted in the ultra-conservative Orthodox environment over the rejection of TINs and the new-format passports, and how many tried to find signs of the end times, the number of the beast, and the Antichrist in modern civilization."[17]

The person who initiated the seclusion was 43-year-old Pyotr Kuznetsov, known as schemamonk Maxim [18]. He urged his followers to reject televisions, radios, money, and even to burn their passports. However, he himself did not descend into the

underground shelter with the group. In mid-November, he was detained and referred to psychiatric assessment.



On November 20, Interfax published the following report [19]: *"The individuals who took shelter in an underground dugout in Penza Oblast while awaiting the 'end of the world' do not belong to any cult, but are 'simply under the strong influence of their leader's prophecies,' according to archbishop Filaret of Penza and Kuznetsk."*

"'These are ordinary Orthodox Christians. They are not cultists,' the archbishop told journalists on Tuesday. He said he had sent a telegram to the authorities, explaining the situation. 'The most important thing I asked for in the telegram was to refrain from using force against the recluses,' he added."

According to him, a tent had been set up near the dugout in Penza region, where liturgies were held daily, and the most respected representatives of Penza clergy came regularly to negotiate with the group. [19]

Entrance to the cave of the Penza recluses. Source:blagovest-info.ru

RACIRS steps in

However, the remarks of archbishop Filaret of Penza and Kuznetsk did little to stop members of the totalitarian extremist sect led by Alexander Dvorkin from launching an informational terror campaign in mass media. Below are some notable quotes from a press release circulated during a RACIRS conference:

"On November 21, 2007, RIA Novosti hosted a RACIRS press conference dedicated to the issue of cultists hiding since late October in a cave they dug ***near the village of Poganovka (formerly Durkino) in Penza Oblast.****"*[20]

Here again, Dvorkin's anticultists coined a fresh insult — "Durkino," a mocking name roughly translatable as Crazyville.

Let's recall: as Dvorkin himself admitted, "We work with many journalists from federal media," so organizing a major press conference came easy. It was attended by reporters from nearly all major Russian outlets, including ITAR-TASS, Regnum, Novy Region, National News Agency, Social Information Agency, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Izvestia, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Gazeta.ru, and broadcasters such as Echo TV, Russia Today, City FM, Govorit Moskva, Zvezda, and Avtoradio.

The press conference panel included [20]:

- Professor Alexander Dvorkin, president of RACIRS and head of the Sectology Department at the Missionary Faculty of Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University of Humanities (PSTGU);
- Priest Lev Semenov, RACIRS executive secretary, candidate of historical sciences, and associate professor at PSTGU;
- Psychologist Alina Vinogradova.

Further in the press release, it was stated:

"The press conference started with an introductory speech by Professor Alexander Dvorkin, where he described the unfolding situation, **outlined key characteristics of the extremist pseudo-Orthodox movement** to which the Poganovka cult belongs, and **listed a number of other similar cults and sects**."[20]

Once again, the pejorative phrase "Poganovka (Disgustville) cult" was used, aimed at dehumanizing the group. Moreover, when answering questions, Dvorkin insisted that resolving the situation required engaging the group's spiritual leader, Pyotr Kuznetsov:

"It's very important to work with Kuznetsov. ***He told the cult members not to come out*** *until he gives them a certain signal. We need to understand what that signal is and force him to give it."*

According to Dvorkin, the fact that Kuznetsov himself didn't descend into the dugout with his followers allowed *"asserting with near-total certainty that he has a backup plan for resolving the situation."*

Next, anticultist Dvorkin made another statement:

"The cult members who have taken refuge underground are almost certainly subject to mutual psychological pressure, which is why none of the 29 individuals dares to express any doubts or desire to leave. Such behavior is typical for cults. Even if cult members have doubts, they are afraid to express them because they fear reentering the outside world."[20]

Dvorkin's assertion of "mutual psychological pressure" is not an objective analysis, but a piece of anticult propaganda. It lacks factual support, disregards the complexities of human motivation, and excludes the voices of the individuals involved. In such contexts, statements like these serve more to incite panic than to genuinely understand the situation. The phrase "such behavior is typical for cults" exemplifies classic anticult rhetoric, substituting thorough examination of specific circumstances with sweeping accusations and group stigmatization.

Notably, at the time of his statements, Dvorkin had no direct access to the individuals involved or reliable information about the underground events. His claims were based solely on assumptions and conjecture. No interviews with participants or independent psychological assessments were presented, nor could they have been, given the group's isolation.

Assuming that all participants acted solely under psychological pressure is an oversimplification that replaces nuanced analysis with dogmatic positioning. Dvorkin's statement appears designed to evoke alarm and sympathy for the "victims of the cult" while casting suspicion on the group itself. This is a common tactic among anticultists: portraying "cultists" and "sectarians" as individuals who have lost their will, entirely controlled by their leader.

In a conclusion, RACIRS secretary Lev Semenov emphasized the "importance" of conducting "Orthodox Christian" lessons in schools. This initiative seems more like an attempt to implant certain ideologies into people's minds. As evident from the press conference, these are not lessons about Christian love for one's neighbor, but rather about Nazi-style segregation. What else could the followers of Walter Künneth and Friedrich-Wilhelm Haack bring to society?

Journalists set up a camp near the cave

The situation escalates

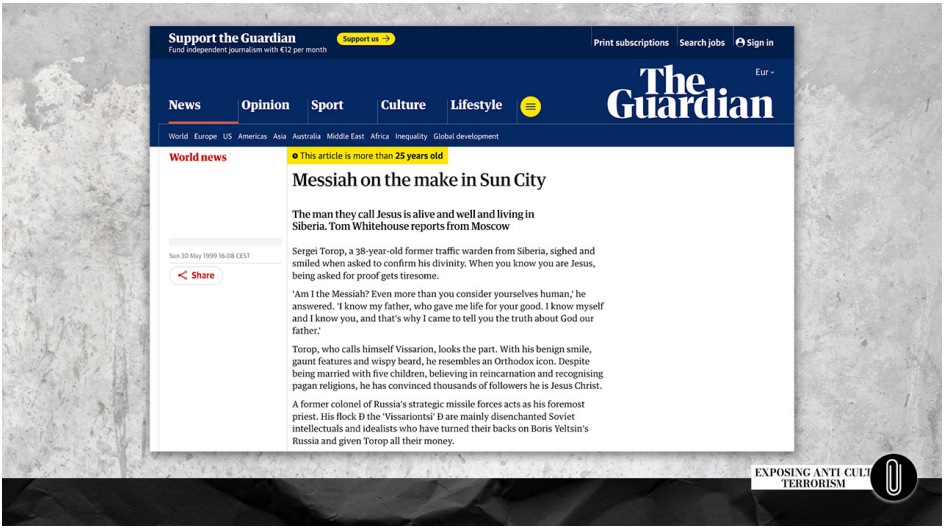
On the same day (November 21, 2007), another article appeared, this time on Alexander Shchipkov's website, further fueling the hysteria surrounding the Penza case. Again, the anticult method of guilt by association with other religious movements was employed.

"A situation like the one in Penza region will arise in many parts of Russia unless a unified national program for fighting sects and cults is developed," said Alexander Dvorkin, president of the Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects.

"This case can be a detonator: other cults may also start proclaiming the 'end of the world,'" Dvorkin said at a press conference held today in Moscow, according to Interfax.

*"According to him, a 'very dangerous situation' is currently unfolding in Krasnoyarsk Krai where members of the Vissarion cult have been living in tents for a long time, also awaiting the 'end of the world.' '**Things can "explode" in Krasnoyarsk Krai very soon. The risk of mass suicides is very high**'."*[21]

The Vissarion religious movement isn't the focus of our study. However, it is worth noting that since the 1990s, Western media have consistently cited Dvorkin's attacks on that movement. [22]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Messiah on the make in Sun City
The man they call Jesus is alive and well and living in Siberia. Tom Whitehouse reports from Moscow
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Sergei Torop, a 38-year-old former traffic warden from Siberia, sighed and smiled when asked to confirm his divinity. When you know you are Jesus, being asked for proof gets tiresome.
'Am I the Messiah? Even more than you consider yourselves human,' he answered. 'I know my father, who gave me life for your good. I know myself and I know you, and that's why I came to tell you the truth about God our father.'
Torop, who calls himself Vissarion, looks the part. With his benign smile, gaunt features and wispy beard, he resembles an Orthodox icon. Despite being married with five children, believing in reincarnation and recognising pagan religions, he has convinced thousands of followers he is Jesus Christ.
A former colonel of Russia's strategic missile forces acts as his foremost priest. His flock Ð the 'Vissariontsi' Ð are mainly disenchanted Soviet intellectuals and idealists who have turned their backs on Boris Yeltsin's Russia and given Torop all their money.
EXPOSING ANTI CULT TERRORISM

After years of harassment and hysteria surrounding the community, involving Dvorkin's agent network within the BBC and other European and U.S. media, the Vissarion movement was ultimately shut down in 2020. Vissarion himself was detained on charges of illegal religious activity and suspected psychological abuse. BBC released a documentary about the movement in 2021. [23]

Police are patrolling the residence of Pyotr Kuznetsov. Source: pravda-news.ru

Journalists from "Russkiy Vestnik" ("Russian Herald") [24] offered an intriguing perspective on the "Penza recluses saga":

"The Penza recluses were a godsend for 'Professor' [Dvorkin]. He ranted and raved about their cultism. Meanwhile, according to archbishop Filaret of Penza and Kuznetsk, the people who took refuge in the Penza region's dugout, awaiting

the 'end of the world,' did not belong to any cult, but were 'simply deeply influenced by their leader's prophecies.' 'These are ordinary Orthodox Christians. They are not sectarians.' To the archbishop, they are lost sheep, while to the 'professor,' they are enemies." [25]

In its December 8, 2007 issue, the newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda presented an alternative explanation for why those believers retreated underground. Elena Fetisova, member of the religious group who did not descend into the cave and returned to Novocherkassk, told the reporter:

"No one even thought about going underground," she said."We planned to pray in those caves, that's all. But when local hooligans and alcoholics started coming around, killing dogs, beating Vitaly Nedogon (he's now the leader underground), and harassing his 14-year-old daughter Olechka, we decided to retreat underground..." [26]

This raises a question: could Dvorkin's anticultists and their associates have orchestrated the entire situation themselves, given his close ties to doghunters? Investigators, however, did not consider this line of events.

Maria Orlova, senior assistant to the head of the Investigative Department for Media Relations of the Investigative

Committee under the Prosecutor's Office of Russia for Penza Region, informed Nezavisimaya Gazeta about potential criminal prosecution of the cult members:

"Currently, two criminal cases have been initiated regarding the incident, consolidated into one proceeding... The first case was initiated back in November under Article 239 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, concerning the establishment of a religious association that infringes on individual rights and freedoms. The second case pertains to inciting hatred or enmity based on an examination of books seized from the cult members. It was previously believed that those books were published by the cult leader Pyotr Kuznetsov. The investigation is now working to determine the authorship of the books."[27]

By December 11, the situation escalated:

"Special forces operatives have developed a detailed plan to rescue the recluses barricaded in Penza region and awaiting the end of the world. The cave's layout has been mapped, along with detailed descriptions of possible actions by operatives during the assault. ***According to a source in law enforcement , the cultists*** *have no intention of leaving the cave voluntarily and* ***can only be removed by force."***[28]

It is noteworthy that a similar approach was taken in the case of the Branch Davidians in Waco, where the FBI — against expert warnings — relied on the guidance of invited anticultist Rick Alan Ross. This episode has been examined in detail in "The IMPACT" documentary.

On December 14, the portal Interfax-Religion, citing the newspaper "Tvoi Den" ("Your Day"), reported that "Pyotr Kuznetsov, currently in a psychiatric clinic, attempted suicide. However, he was saved." Subsequently, this misinformation was refuted by the regional psychiatric hospital's management:

*"**This is complete fiction**," deputy chief medical officer Vyacheslav Belousov told Rossiyskaya Gazeta. "Kuznetsov's condition is stable. **He hasn't even expressed a desire to end his life.** A psychological and psychiatric assessment is being conducted. No diagnosis has been established yet, so no treatment has been prescribed."*[29]

In January 2008, references to the Waco tragedy resurfaced in the media again.

"One of the leading experts on sects and cults, 'professor' Alexander Dvorkin, believes that those barricaded in Penza catacombs may indeed set themselves on fire. In an interview with Vesti TV, he noted: 'Those people have been under

prolonged psychological influence from that very Father Pyotr. He manipulated their consciousness, isolating them in a remote village, away from their usual environment, and ultimately driving them to such hysteria. This is standard practice in a world of totalitarian sects. People seem to act voluntarily, but in reality, they are forced, as they are absolutely unfree.' The cult expert speaks of a high probability of collective suicide among the recluses. ***...Among relatively recent events is the tragedy of "Koresh's cult" in the USA (1993). At that time, in the compound surrounded by police and troops, a fire suddenly broke out, killing both the leader of the Branch Davidian organization and about a hundred adherents. According to one version, they set themselves on fire, unwilling to surrender to the police; according to another, the storming forces burned the barricaded and resisting individuals as edification."*** [13, p.26] [30]

"Professor" Dvorkin's emphasis on the risk of suicide among the recluses wasn't random. This kind of rhetoric echoes a familiar playbook already used by anticultists during the Waco siege involving the Branch Davidians, where the main expert was the infamous American anticultist Rick Alan Ross. In the Russian case though, Dvorkin seized the initiative entirely. His voice became the sole "authoritative" source for journalists, law enforcement, and the general public. This raises a legitimate question: how did all other opinions, including those

of religious scholars, psychologists, and even church officials, get completely pushed aside by Dvorkin's aggressive rhetoric?

Given how insistently anticultists drew parallels with the Waco tragedy, it's not hard to guess what kind of finale Dvorkin was aiming for in the case of Penza recluses.

Around-the-clock police and military patrol near the cave. Source: realt.onliner.by

Final act

In March 2008, the underground shelter began to collapse due to flooding.[31] On March 28, after negotiations, seven women agreed to come to the surface. On April 1 and 2, another 17 people left. Those who emerged tried to convince the remaining 11 to follow, but the recluses refused.

On April 2, mass media reported that Pyotr Kuznetsov had attempted suicide. He was found in a shed on his property with head trauma and was taken to the hospital. Earlier reports claimed he had been beaten by his own followers, but the Investigative Committee later stated the main version was an attempted suicide:

"It was a suicide attempt... Kuznetsov inflicted stab wounds on himself, using an unidentified item, and was then hospitalized. His condition is now stable, and he remains under medical observation." [32]

By April 10, the remaining recluses ceased communication, citing a vow of silence. On the same day, archbishop Filaret of the Penza and Kuznetsk Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church suggested the entire episode may have been a premeditated operation — moreover, possibly from abroad:

"This can involve some foreign organizations," he told Interfax. "They present themselves as public charities or NGOs, but they can be behind the incident. I don't believe Kuznetsov could have written those books himself," stated Archbishop in an interview with Interfax. [33]

As RIA Novosti reported, on April 12, one of the former cave dwellers told journalists:

"We were trying to escape civilization and had no plans to go into the cave ***until the authorities started paying increased attention to us.*** *At first, we thought we'd just pray in the cave, but after the police arrived and started checking passports, we were forced to go underground."*[34]

The woman also said that before a part of the cave collapsed, there were about 30 cells where the recluses lived. Now only about 10 rooms remain underground.

"Some people left because there was no longer any place to sleep," she explained. [35]

On May 16, 2008, the last of the recluses left the cave [36]. That same day, the court ruled that the books by Pyotr Kuznetsov, the leader of "Nikolsk recluses," were extremist. [37]

On October 15, 2008, the new head of the Interior Ministry for Penza Region, major general Aleksandr Kasimkin [36], told reporters that the reclusion of "Penza sitters" was the result of a lack of effective investigative work. "The police overlooked the situation," he said. However, the general also noted that work to counter religious extremism in the Penza region was ongoing.

"We currently focus on enforcing the law through criminal intelligence and surveillance operations to gather information

in advance and prevent illegal activities. There is reason to believe that this work is now being carried out efficiently."[36]

On July 16, 2008, Pyotr Kuznetsov was tried in the Penza region, but was committed to compulsory psychiatric treatment. Over the years, mass media occasionally reported that the treatment was being extended until 2014. After that, the story vanished from the public eye.

Conclusions

The end of what came to be known as the "Penza sit-in" can hardly be called happy: eventually, two people died. One of them was an elderly woman with cancer who had entered the retreat already diagnosed with the disease, which likely caused her death. But considering the outcome anticultists had hoped for and the narrative that the extremist totalitarian sect led by Aleksandr Dvorkin appeared to be orchestrating, amplifying the rhetoric of "suicides in cults," it is clear that their plan failed.

Still, it's difficult to imagine the pressure the recluses were under: surveillance around the clock with law enforcement, reporters, police, and clergy never giving them a moment's peace for seven months. On top of that came constant psychological manipulation, including through intermediaries.

It's easy to see how that could have triggered a mental breakdown or worse.

When it became clear the recluses weren't going to come out voluntarily, local authorities and law enforcement began to consider forced evacuation. Here's how Nikolai Dubovik, a former deputy of the Belarusian House of Representatives who went to the scene, described the situation:

"Some media outlets reported that ***the main option being considered was the use of sleeping gas,*** *though this was never confirmed."*[39]

This sounds disturbingly similar to what happened in Waco in 1993 when the FBI used sleeping gas. We all remember what kind of tragedy followed. And who could have planted such an idea?

Dubovik believes the order to back off may have come from the highest levels of authority.

"OMON [special police unit] said they could evacuate everyone in half an hour, but they didn't take the risk. There was too much media attention, and elections were just around the corner in Russia. I think they decided to wait until everyone came out on their own... Everyone was afraid people might die: they could have blown up gas canisters, given their mental state," the former deputy said. [39]

The authorities then decided to wait for spring and hope that flooding would begin to seep into the cave. In other words, it was the upcoming Russian presidential election and not compassion or common sense that spared the "recluses" from the fate planned for them by Dvorkin's extremist sect.

Later, Novye Izvestia published a comment on the situation from Pavel Kostylev, a cult expert and senior researcher at Lomonosov Moscow State University:

"The recluses should have been left alone ... Instead, the entire attention was drawn to them. The media amplified a model of behavior that other religious fanatics might follow."[40]

That may have been exactly the point. Consider this revealing detail: on February 20, 2007, just nine months before the Penza incident, Aleksandr Dvorkin declared:

"The Criminal Code must include terms such as 'mind control' and 'psychological violence.' These terms would allow us to effectively combat cults," Dvorkin said at a press conference in Moscow on Tuesday. [41]

Dvorkin noted that there is currently no legal definition of the term "cult" or "sect" in Russia. The word is typically used in academic and sociological contexts. However, the anticultist argued, the time has not yet come to clarify the term legally or adopt a special law on "cults" and sects."

"If a law on sects and cults were passed today, we would lose. We need thorough preparation first, and ***we need to build a solid legal and evidentiary framework for combating sects and cults,"*** *the professor emphasized.* [41]

At the beginning of this article, we quoted Dvorkin explaining his escape from the United States: he claimed he returned to Russia because there was no total control there, and that "it's the freest country." He moved there not out of love for his homeland or patriotic motives, but he fled globalization. It's no coincidence that he named his center after Irenaeus of Lyons. In the 2nd century AD, it was Irenaeus who began the Christian crackdown on dissent, driven by fear of the Antichrist's arrival. Irenaeus was the first to introduce the concept of the "number of the beast" and speculate about its meaning — not as a symbol, but as a tool of power. The name of the center speaks volumes: fear, paranoia, and a need for control — these are the hallmarks of Dvorkin and his anticult activities laced with sadism and perversions.

After arriving in Russia, Dvorkin embedded himself within the Russian Orthodox Church and used it as a foundation to build what is arguably the most apocalyptic totalitarian sect in the world today . All of it driven by the same fear and lust for power — secret power. So what's the outcome? Russia is turning into a concentration camp where dissent is crushed under the pretext of fighting "sects" and "cults," and mass consciousness is subject to total control.

Here's what Andrey Kuraev said back in 2001:

"Moscow is planning to introduce a Muscovite card. It will track when I enter the subway and where I go. Those will no longer be anonymous trips. It'll also record what books and newspapers I buy, which websites I visit, and what information I download. From that, one can figure out what I'm thinking. This is control over the way people think."[7]

Any new technology is neutral by itself: it can be used for good or for harm. It all depends on whose hands it is in and what the government's goals are. So the real question is: who brought Russian society to the point of becoming a prison camp where any dissent is stamped out and dissenters are labeled "destructors" , "foreign agents," "cultists," "sectarians," and "enemies of the state"?

The answer is paradoxical: those who shouted the loudest about "spiritual values," "national identity," and "resisting globalization" were the very ones who paved the way for total control. Under the guise of protecting society from imaginary threats, anticultists have been systematically blurring the line between religious freedom and extremism, between persuasion and coercion. In the name of "spiritual security," they planted a fear of dissenters in the public consciousness and, in doing so, played a pivotal role in shaping a climate of suspicion and repression. While resisting globalization

outwardly, in a paradoxical way, they reproduced its worst features, only this time under their own, “patriotic” flag.

To conclude, we’d like to cite the words of Aleksander Panchenko, a prominent scholar of Russian folk beliefs:

“Since we’re talking about new religious movements and the current religious landscape in Russia, I cannot but express my outrage that the Expert Council on State Religious Evaluation under the Ministry of Justice is headed by the odious activist of the anticult movement, ***Aleksander Dvorkin who, in my view, should be prosecuted for inciting religious hatred.”***[42]

Until he is stopped, Dvorkin will continue his informational terror attacks against society. Who’s next to be attacked?

Meeting with Alexander Dvorkin, Vladikavkaz. April 5, 2025

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